Progress ‘from here to there’ in academic writing

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This paper reports on a qualitative study into academic literacy factors impacting on the development of academic writing skills within an EAL tertiary programme. Data has been collected over three semesters by using focus group methodologies. These groups responded to key cues about academic writing at the start and near the end of a 14-week course. The data, therefore, covers ‘from here to there’ and measures reported learner progress. These learner reports are triangulated by a mid-course tutor interview and by the analysis of learners’ reflective memoranda, which themselves offer evidence to support (or refute) the students’ self-reporting. In particular, we consider the students’ progress in understanding academic genre features, including discourse structures, and the usefulness of multi-draft portfolios. In final interviews, students report on enhancements to their understanding of discursive forms and the learning value inherent in the writing process.

We suggest that a multi-draft portfolio is an effective assessment tool not only because it provides a teacher feedback loop, but also because it enhances learners’ understanding of writing as a process. This provides them with such aspects of academic writing literacy as self-editing and the insight to reorganise academic texts by applying target genre and discourse knowledge.
1. Introduction: from here to there

Recent research indicates that the field of writing lacks a coherent framework for understanding of “how people actually learn to write in a second language” and of how teaching contributes to this learning (Cumming & Riazi, 2000, p. 57). Aside from studies into autonomy and meta-cognition (Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999), little research, write Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), “has been dedicated to the strategies and other cognitive operations involved in putting pen to paper … and drafting a coherent, meaningful, piece of connected discourse” (pp. 4-5).

This paper reports on a study examining the literacy factors that impact on the development of academic writing skills of participants of an EAL (English as an Additional Language) first-year tertiary course, ‘Academic Writing’ (AW). These academic literacy factors include such skills as referencing, planning, self-editing and ability to reorganise academic texts by applying target genre and discourse knowledge (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). This study asks how far students come, ‘from here to there’, during this multi-draft, portfolio-based course. The research questions are:
- What learning about genre and discourse occurs?
- How is this knowledge applied to learners’ own academic writing in the form of literacy factors?
- How useful are multi-draft portfolios for teaching and learning AW?

We contend that portfolio-based learning and teaching adds considerable value to the AW process, providing learners with an authentic, learner-controlled learning experience. The value of this experience is meta-cognitive and engaging.

Before we describe the methodology and present our findings, we first need to ground our questions in the fields of literature.

2. Literature review

Portfolios and theories of writing

Establishing a critical frame for examining the academic literacy factors that impact on learning and performance in AW is no simple matter. Researchers and practitioners of AW in EAL need to ground their research and teaching in understanding pedagogies informed by significant aspects of past and present approaches. Insights from cognitivists, exponents of collaborative writing, process writing, socio-literacy and genre-based approaches - all assist in theorising academic literacy factors in AW. As social literacy scholar, Johns wrote: instructors “should assist students to draw from their past strategies and experiences and to develop new approaches to texts and tasks” (Johns, 1997, p. 19). Here, we survey the place of portfolios across several of these approaches. We also review how portfolio-based writing courses can encourage learners to focus on understanding genre and their discourse features, and how multiple drafting can successfully provide form-focused feedback without sacrificing the bigger picture.
Firstly, as Ferris and Hedgcock summarise (2005, pp. 5-6), *process-oriented writing pedagogies* focused attention on how learners solve problems, discover ideas, express thought in writing, and revise resultant texts, typically divorced from cultural, educational, or socio-political contexts (Canagarajah, 2002; Cumming, 2003; Hyland 2003). Therefore, pre-writing, peer and teacher feedback, and revision are fundamental practices for most process-based approaches (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2001).

Next, representatives of *cognitivist approaches* also see L2 writing as a process that includes invention or prewriting tasks, drafting multiple versions, text-level revision, collaborative writing, feedback sessions, and the postponement of editing until the final stages of the composing cycle (Murray, 1992; Atkinson, 2003; Clark 2003). For a cognitivist, process-based perspective, writing is “essentially learnt, not taught, and the teacher’s role is to be nondirective and facilitating... through an encouraging and cooperative environment with minimal interference” (Hyland, 2003, p. 18).

Cognitivists also established grounding for constructing a post-process framework recognising writing as a form of literacy (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 8-9). Writing becomes, then, an inherently social, transactional process involving mediation between writer and audience (Flower, 1994; Gee, 1996, 1998). For EAL learners, *socio-literacy approaches*, as Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2001) emphasise, “present frequent opportunities to write, in a variety of forms or genres, for a variety of purposes” (p. 37; see also Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 8-9). In this and *genre-based approaches*, through understanding readers and their expectations, writers shape texts to meet these expectations in targeted discourse communities (Hinds, 1987; Hyland, 2000, 2003). Hence, writers gain control over the language and written genres of such communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 9).

Another approach that has had major implications for teaching ESL writing is *contrastive rhetoric*, since this approach characterises divergent expectations and their effects on L2 literacy development, including L2 writing skills. Gass and Selinker (2001) believe that direct instruction focusing on major contrastive features can accelerate the language learning process. Most recently, *cross-linguistic approaches* teach us that “the organisation of writing is influenced by culture-specific norms, which could give rise to negative evaluations in intercultural contexts” (Bowe & Martin, 2007, p. 137).

### 2.1. Features and advantages of portfolio-based assessment

A portfolio is defined by Hamp-Lyons (1991) as “a collection of texts the writer has produced over a defined period of time to the specifications of a particular context” (p. 262). One major advantage of this collecting of writing is that it provides socio-literacy information about the writers as well as archiving their writings (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 33).

Describing the features of portfolios, researchers identify nine characteristics that thoughtfully designed portfolios share: collection, range, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student-centred control, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific parameters, and development over time. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) emphasise that portfolios can have
“a generative, rather than a reductive effect on education”. This, they maintain, is because portfolios provide rich data for all stakeholders: students, teachers, researchers and administrators (p. xv). Although portfolio-based assessments, similar to traditional direct tests, focus on products, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) suggest this product accommodates the writing process uniquely and accommodates a variety of writing contexts (p. 5). The authenticity of portfolio writing, mirroring what actually happens in universities, is a further advantage for EAL writers (Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p. 262).

Lynch and Shaw (2002) aptly summarise the value of portfolio assessments: they investigate developmental sequences in student learning; elicit a sampling of authentic learning contexts focusing on process and product; involve ongoing direction, reflection and opportunity for further learning; provide an integral part of teaching and learning processes and report results in a qualitative profile.

In summary, the key features and benefits of portfolio-based courses as seen by various researchers begin with their authenticity. This relates to genuine literacy contexts, socio-literate communities and the genres they produce (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000; Johns, 1997). Second, portfolios represent a collection and archive, documenting evolution over time (Reynolds, 2000; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 37). Third, they offer learners the opportunity to apply higher order thinking skills, including meta-cognitive skills (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 180). Because of this, portfolios enable the building of good reflective practices (Reynolds, 2000; Johns 1997; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). One example is commenting on how writing enhances literacy skills. Consequently, such guided self-assessment helps to “put control for learning into the learner’s hands” (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 36) and may lead to writer-centred control (Weigle, 2002).

In short, portfolios are seen as an instrument for maximising the interactive, heuristic, recursive elements of process-based composing pedagogy (Hamp-Lyons, 1991), accommodating elements of each of the writing systems mentioned above (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 50).

2.2. Genre awareness and multiple drafting: impact on academic literacy skills

Writing about literacy in socio-literate communities, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) take a genre-oriented approach to literacy development: “socialization into academic literacy … presupposes that writing is not only a communication ‘technology’ (p. 47), but also a social practice (Gee, 1998). Johns (1997) maintains “literacies are acquired principally through exposure to discourses … through this exposure, individuals gradually develop theories of genre” (p. 14).

Socio-literacy views have implications for literacy instruction particularly in EAL communities (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Hinkel (2002, cited by Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) also acknowledge that to generate acceptable texts, students must master “the mechanical aspects of composing sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of discourse that correspond to the dominant genres of the academy, a specific field, or both” (p. 57). At the same time,
“learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community” (Silva, 1990, p. 17).

Our study accords with Hyland (2005): writing is a needs-oriented social activity requiring explicit expectations and involving learning to use language (pp. 88-89). In short, portfolios engage students in ongoing analysis and evaluation as reflected in multiple drafting. Further insights come from Kim and Kim (2005), who found that a balance of process and genre approaches to AW maximise learning gains. Portfolio-based writing assessment can be used with any approach to writing instruction but fits best with the genre-process nexus approach, eliminating the tension of process vs product approaches (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

Many studies identify specific academic literacy impacts on learning via multiple drafting. Regularity of writing and feedback leads to increased meta-cognitive awareness and hence autonomy in error correction (Vickers & Ene, 2006). There are positive impacts due to its regular cycles of self-monitoring (Xiang, 2006). It can enhance specific literacy skills: brainstorming (Rao, 2007), paraphrasing (Keck, 2006), and redrafting (Weigle, 2002). Further, it offers opportunities for acquisition of genre-related skills in a student-controlled environment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Lastly, Hamp-Lyons (1991) connects ESL writing and L2 literacy development: meaningful writing instruction is literacy instruction to them (p. 30).

3. Context of the study and participants

The study took place within an AW paper on a BA(EAL) programme at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. A diverse group of 41 subjects (14 male and 27 female, aged 17 to 39) included first-year BA(EAL) major students and institute-wide degree-level students, taking the course to succeed in their major subject. The paper is at Level 5, first year tertiary. Entry requirements are an IELTS Band 5.5 or equivalent. The participants come from a variety of countries: China, Hong-Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, India, Iran, Russia, Mexico, Germany, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kuwait.

The 14-week course is made up of 6 contact hours per week. The assessment includes regular weekly writings which are presented as a portfolio weighting 30% of the course. The authentic, real-world tasks in the portfolio vary in text types: from academic description and evaluation to the argumentative essay, incorporating micro- and macro-level writing and learning. The course is structured in such a way that a range of strategies involved in the portfolio prepares learners for a final academic essay assessment.

4. Methodology

Qualitative, grounded research approaches provide authentic, reflective and evaluative insights of real learner experience. Our data comes from transcriptions of two sets of open-ended focus group interviews, recorded in weeks 3 and 13. Each group contained four participants. The process was repeated over three intakes, with data collected from 41 students. This method adopts the rationale of open-ended interviewing: “the only person who
understands the social reality in which they live is the person themselves” (Burns, 2000, p. 425).

We used one form of triangulation for the current project. First, we taped mid-semester semi-structured tutor interviews to find out how students thought they were progressing. These transcriptions are used as confirmability audits (Brice, 2005, p. 175). For the present project, we present rich-text data from the student interviews, selecting themes which recurred in tutor interviews. A second form of triangulation is not used for this paper. However, we also elicited written reflections of 250 words from learners after they received final feedback. This data contains students’ self-reports about areas of progress or lack of progress, and projections about what actions they need to take to ensure progress after they finish AW.

The researchers used open-coding for content analysis, seeking lexical and thematic patterns within the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1998; Brice, 2005) to ensure that themes emerged plausibly (Burns, 2000, p. 434). This approach involves locating recurrent themes and organising data around them to provide a basis for content analysis (Burns, 2000, p. 435; Brice, 2005, p. 162).

Reflective data is useful because it both provides a snapshot of the 13-week portfolio process and promotes meta-cognition (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2002). However, self-reporting has its limitations, since learners may only disclose what they want the researcher to hear. This is where the tutor interview is useful in that the observer-tutor, who conducts the interview as part of a pedagogical process, is disengaged from the project. Hence, an element of observational insight is preserved. This road through our data gives us the best path ‘from here to there’, enabling us to identity key academic literacy factors.

5. Findings and Discussion

Our wider study identifies 15 main themes from the focus group data. Here, we describe and briefly discuss three themes in order of frequency of occurrence: the novelty of referencing; the development of understandings of discursive forms and the range of learning capital inherent in the draft-focussed portfolio-based writing process. These relate, respectively, to our second, first and third research questions.

5.1. The novelty of referencing

The most significant theme, relating directly to our second research question about how learners apply generic and discursive knowledge to their work as literacy factors, was the acquisition of referencing techniques and conventions, and the role of paraphrasing and summarising within it. Surprisingly, thirty-four students mention it. Wan’s is a typical observation: “Here we focus on references. In China, we didn’t work on this”. Jung (Korea) states that referencing is his greatest challenge: “I can’t accept the concept of referencing. I know how to do it in my mind but I really hate doing it”. This finding is due to two factors: the academic literacy imperative in operation throughout our organisation and the fact that the
second focus group interviews occurred at a time when referencing had recently been taught. In fact, four students said focusing on referencing prevented them from being able to attend to wider discourse structure: referencing became an obsessive diversion. Referencing is nonetheless a significant academic literacy skill acquired during AW.

5.2. Understanding discursive forms

In our first research question, we are interested in finding out what learning about genre and discourse occurs during the writing of a multi-draft portfolio within an AW course for adult EAL learners. Twenty students report increased awareness of the discourse features of texts. Most comments refer to the academic essay, the all-encompassing final task within the portfolio. With this often comes an increased awareness of appropriate tone, register, syntactic selection, and reader-centredness. Ella (China) reflects: “conventions can help us to create a form and improve the writing overall in terms of reader understandability”. Jing after describing her writing habits in “the Chinese way”, resolves that now she is “trying to use other types of introduction: ‘funnel’, statistics, funny stories, to start my essay to interest the reader”. Describing body paragraphs, Erma (Korea) remarks that her key learning consists in “how to put in other people’s ideas to connect my ideas, how to link and support my ideas with those of other people, and the discourse structure of paragraphs”. Managing the content of paragraphs and developing support sentences from a topical base constitutes Anna’s main learning: “Every paragraph has one idea, but in China, we can have one main idea and you can give another main idea at the end of the paragraph to lead to the next paragraph”.

The data contains a range of comments on emergent understandings of discursive forms and their impact on written confidence. “I didn’t know how to write a paragraph, didn’t write structured essays”, explains Tara (Iran): “so it’s given you more academic skills and you feel more confident about using them now”. Ella observes that “conventions help us to improve ‘CC’ (coherence and cohesion) … seeing the whole piece of writing is important instead of throwing ideas into a structure”. Miwa (Korea) detects that understanding conventions of structure affects the coherence of an essay and gives its overall quality; Anna (Korea) concurs: “conventions of ‘CC’ are fundamental to a good essay as business students focus on structure and apply the AW skills to business”. Next, Farat (Iran) notes that the convention of starting with the thesis and then writing topic-based sentences is useful for those who wish to write academically in other subjects. “Learning these conventions”, comments Jung, “aids us in getting a formal tone, writing logically and understandably in ‘the right way’.”

One subtheme that emerges is the contrast between the discourse conventions of the students’ culture and that of western AW. Shoichi (Japan) argues that AW in English is “straight, linear, focuses on the idea; but in Japan it is not straight, it is more tangential, with the main points at the end”. Farad (Iran) also states that paragraphing poses a challenge: “it is opposite to English. In English, we state the topic sentence and then support it, but in my language we support at the end of the paragraph. It is a major difference”. Wan is similarly cross-cultural: “AW is hard for me in both Chinese and English because of the vocabulary and ideas. As for the writing style, Chinese AW is not that straightforward and to-the-point, so it’s less direct than the western academic style. We always put our thesis at the beginning, but they don’t do that in Chinese”. This theme is also described by Helena (Korea): “When we start an
academic article, we don’t point out the topic straight away; we need to write a lot of background to support the topic. In English, we need to set the main idea in the first sentence, so the structure’s different”. Erica (Korea) adds that “in general writing, we prefer to put the important sentence at the end”. Esther states that “English style requires evidence to follow the thesis, but Korean allows us to write in a more dramatic way”. Miwa sums up these students’ references to cultural specificity in discourse conventions and generic structure: “‘Learning is culture’ as in Korean the layout and form are totally different”. These citations are representative of a large number within our data which suggest that academic literacy factors can be enhanced by increasing learner awareness of cross-cultural contrasts.

There also seems to be some resistance to the primacy of the thesis-first-topic sentence-first convention: “the idea of genre comes from Western culture” (Sue, Korea). Farad disparages the convention of conclusions: “Structure is completely different and topic sentences are a western idea. In Iran, conclusions are not merely summaries”. Mohammed (Iran) was emphatic too: “only if you have the vocabulary first, is the structure with the thesis and the structured paragraphs possible”. Perversely, Shoichi said that he had acquired a consciousness of ‘western’ AW strategies, but those he used were “from the Japanese way”. Discursive forms should perhaps allow for more cross-cultural expression and creativity.

Yet seven students (four Korean, three Chinese) comment that teaching genre with an emphasis on normative conventions can scaffold learners into academic literacy. It can draw attention to lexical, syntactical and discursive levels of writing. They comment that this pedagogy is more creative than that of Korea, where students look for discursively locked ways of writing, formula and models. Their implication is that this results in unoriginal academic work. Erica, for instance, relates: “Actually [in Korea] there is a formula about resumes and reports. Lots of people have the custom to copy and even in the report at University, when they write a long report, they just copy this part or that part.” Helena made a similar observation: “I didn’t know how to write an academic essay before. When I went to University, I just copied some sources summarised, I did not put in my own words”. Farina remarks that Kuwaiti students “have to write, but they don’t have to be very serious about that, students, they copy”, a comment supported by Mabel (Iran): “students just choose a book and copy from the book. They don’t have to worry about discourse”.

5.3. Learning value of the writing process within portfolios

Our third research question investigates the learning value of multi-draft portfolios in our EAL context. A typical description of the learning benefits derived from processive portfolio-based writing comes from Miwa (Korea). Miwa explains that she used to “write from start to end in one draft, but now take[s] more time, self-correcting and editing as [she goes]. She adds that she now writes “thesis and topic sentences, drafting with consciousness of cohesion and coherence”. Her comment articulates the process of learning AW ‘from here to there’. Here is a sample of verbatim comments about the academic capital learners report they attained:

AW skills and conventions can be applied to a business context.
Assignments every week help us to recite and progress.
The process shows about me, not only about typical students’ errors and mistakes. The process of writing and rewriting teaches you new things. I learned a lot of specific skills such as paraphrasing. For me reflecting was special as it was new for me. You need to think about why you repeat a mistake.

AW changed my style because I listened to feedback from teachers and peers and could change my language and improve my vocabulary. The process – pre-writing, outlining and so on – controls my ideas when I write my essay. Halfway through the portfolio I started editing. I’ve become comfortable with this. I think it’s good - the process to follow. Editing means looking at the whole structure, not just the grammar. I got a chance of proofreading. Now I might find my mistakes before I hand in my paper. There’s always something new to find in your work that you can improve.

Here we list a sampling of the academic literacy factors impacting on learners’ development of AW skills. These comments gesture to commonly quoted advantages of process writing within portfolio structures: the learning is individual (“about me”), recursive rather than iterative (“recite, process”), transferable (to a business community, for instance) and empowering (focussing on the ‘why’; understanding how an essay is controlled; becoming comfortable with editing) and leads to student autonomy (“Now I might find the mistakes before I hand in my paper”). It reinforces academic literacies ranging from specific sub-skills (such as planning, brainstorming or paraphrasing) to issues of lexical selection (academic register and appropriacy). Further, it allows for the expression of emergent voices (“gave my research … direction”, “changed my style”, “new for me”, “controls my ideas”) with the kind of “consciousness” that Miwa talks about.

Twenty-four learners indicated the redrafting process impacted their meta-cognitive and autonomous skills. A future business student, Ella (China) has a system: she describes a process beginning with brainstorming and involving research, writing ideas and relating them to the topic. “Brainstorming”, she argues, is “the cornerstone that makes your whole essay link well”. Wan discovered the skill of planning: “With a plan, I now can see the big picture from the beginning: knowing where you are going to go”. Vinna (China) emphasises the value of prewriting and outlining: “they control my ideas when I write my essay - very central.” Miwa speaks of her “consciousness of cohesion and coherence”, part of her newly found writing process. Her compatriot, Erma, also states: “regular practice-feedback-self-correction leads to improvement”. Esther adds that, as long as she can get diagnostic help (about lexical appropriacy and grammatical forms), she can use a range of resources “to find the right way by myself”.

6. Conclusions

Our paper suggests that instructors and researchers can gain insights into experiences of learning AW conventions within a multi-draft, process-based portfolio pedagogy by seeking convergences in the thinking of a range of writing theorists from process theorists, cognitivists, contrastive rhetoricians to the most recent exponents of socio-literacy. As Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) suggest, the portfolio’s impact on education is generative rather
than reductive (p. xv), helping, amongst other stakeholders, learners to assume more responsibility for their advancement in written proficiency. This provides a valuable, authentic, learner-controlled experience of learning.

This study contributes to researchers’ and instructors’ understanding of the usefulness of multi-draft portfolios for teaching and learning AW literacies within undergraduate EAL programmes. To revisit our first research question (What learning about genre and discourse occurs?), our project concludes that learners report developments in understanding academic discourse features and genre conventions corresponding to text types within the portfolio, most notably the essay. More specifically, they describe increased awareness of register, style and tone in AW. Further, they become aware of their own progress in both academic literacies (referencing, paragraph and text structuring, paraphrasing, summarising) and process-writing strategies for AW (pre-writing, brainstorming, outlining, drafting, editing, proofreading, responding to feedback). The data reveals learners’ new understanding of editing as examining the whole text structure rather than only grammar and vocabulary.

We also ask how generic and discursive knowledge is applied to learners’ own academic writing in the form of literacy factors. A majority of learners show an appreciation of their heightened awareness of the stages in the process of AW: pre-writing, outlining and drafting. In general, learners report changes in their perceptions of AW, such as their movement from writing one draft only to developing a piece of writing via the re-drafting process and their advanced awareness of cohesion and coherence. They gain a sense of progress and hence report increased confidence, which is empowering.

Participants also report awareness of their areas of weakness and the value of their own reflections in the process of portfolio writing leading to their conscious selection of areas of follow-up language work. These reflective memoranda are the subject of forthcoming papers from this study. However, with regard to our third question (How useful are multi-draft portfolios for teaching and learning AW?), we assert that AW multi-draft portfolios promote meta-cognitive and autonomous skills and suggest that learners see opportunities to apply knowledge acquired to future study and business contexts.

Exponents of the process-oriented writing approach and socio-literacy theorists concur that providing learners with multiple options for drafting and redrafting within genre can impact positively on learners’ written academic literacy. At the same time, they can negotiate their cross-cultural and individual ‘voices’ within the conventions of the discourse. As researchers and instructors, we have become aware of the ongoing comparisons students resort to in order to acquire AW literacy, in particular, of the culture-fraught nature of the conventions of AW. In a small number of cases, students exhibit resistance to applying ‘western’ knowledge models. We believe there is space within a genre-based, portfolio-led, process-approach pedagogy to accommodate the discursive understandings of the full multicultural range of our learners.
References


